Anthropology 206

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Ethnography

Family: Wedding Traditions

**Introduction**

For my ethnography, I have selected to study family, in particular, how a family interacts during a wedding in American culture. I made my observations while attending a relative’s three-day wedding celebration. I selected this because it was not your typical American wedding. The traditional wedding in our country is held inside a church, normally one attended from childhood. Other such traditions include the bride wearing her mother’s dress, the groom using his mother or grandmother’s engagement ring, and the father walking the bride down the aisle. The wedding party is usually made up of a few close friends of the bride and groom, and perhaps a ring bearer or a flower girl that is somehow related. The ceremony usually includes prayers or blessings from the pastor or priest and the individual’s marriage vows. The reception consists of speeches by the best man and possibly the father of the bride, dinner, and dancing. The wedding normally lasts one day for the average guest and a couple of days for the bridal party (including the rehearsal dinner).

To understand the need for such an extravagant wedding, I must first provide some background information about the couple. The bride, the youngest of three children, had many friends and family members who had tied the knot in exotic places such as Costa Rica. The family is not necessarily “rich”, but is grouped with those of a high social status. To disappoint anyone’s high expectations for a spectacular wedding would have been unthinkable, not to mention embarrassing. After all, the bride was the last to be married, not only among her siblings, but also among her close-knit group of college friends. For the groom who was the eldest of his siblings, all that mattered was his soon-to-be bride’s happiness, despite some financial tension on his and his family’s side.

**Methodology**

The only practical way for me to effectively observe the varying cultures within this family was to participate in the wedding as much as I possibly could. Only this would ensure the most qualitative descriptions. Fortunately, I am close with the groom. I along with members of his immediate family was asked to usher, read at the ceremony, or even be a groomsman. With my firsthand experience in such a large, diverse wedding, I feel that I am able to effectively present the cultural dynamics at work in joining two families. My goal is present how and why families “put on their best behavior” in these kinds of settings and how this enables a large crowd of people having past experiences with each other, differing religions, social classes, and ethnicities to get along. For example, I witnessed how tense a conversation got between a Mexican woman related to the bride and a white “Irish” border patrol agent related to the groom. I fully anticipated a full-fledged debate on the U.S’s current immigration laws and major national and local companies’ employment of these illegal immigrants. Yet these individuals did not engage in such a debate, in order to preserve the peace. Whether or not this act of reservation was innate or requested, it along with others, serves as the basis of my inquiry. My own personal value system repeatedly conflicted with the tone of this affair. After all, in my micro culture, I have been taught that marriage is to happen first, not cohabitation and then marriage if it works out. Knowing that the couple had lived together for over 4 years made me feel a little skeptical. In my mind, what was everyone making such a big deal of, that they would finally “start their lives together”? But sweeping such critiques aside and employing a measure cultural relativism, I was able to understand more fully.

**Data Presentation and Analysis**

Before attending the first event, the wedding rehearsal, I witnessed the chaos the guests went through as they navigated through road-closures and detours from summer-time road construction, and then attempted to check into their lodgings. For preferred friends and family members, mostly those in the wedding party, a nearby lake house was rented. I had the opportunity to stop by and take a look at it. It was very nice, undoubtedly expensive, right on the water, and would house an intimate number of guests. At the base of the mountain where the wedding would be held, were a couple hotels offering accommodations with pricing from $200 a night for a small apartment-sized room that could sleep 6 and on. The average wedding guest could not afford such pricing. In most cases, they simply drove to and from the resort on the day of the wedding.

All the wedding party and guests were required to ride a chair lift up to the mountain. Those who were needed for rehearsal waited at the base of the mountain, near the chair lifts, for approximately 20 minutes. (The bride and groom were infamously late; in addition, the bride and her bride maids had spent the day at the resort’s spa.) When all had assembled, the bride’s sister, the maid of honor, took control. With her color-coordinated spread sheets, she performed her traditional role as director of events. (To ease the bride’s stress.) What I found odd yet appropriate was that she seemed to have delegated her role to her mother and aunt as well. Once everyone had made it to the top, there were now three women with their color-coordinated lists. A jumbled “rehearsal” took place several times, alcohol being present on the top of the mountain a possible cause for the confusion. Several key-players were missing, a couple groomsmen, the groom’s sister, mother, and step-father, yet eventually things straightened out. At the peak of the imbroglio, the groom’s step-mother also attempted to direct wedding-traffic. In this situation, much like in a complex society, a socially accepted “chief” becomes essential for order and functionalism to prevail, along with subjects to carry out his commands.

At the rehearsal dinner, most people sat with their respective groups, the bride’s maids sat together with their significant others, brothers, sisters, and cousins from the same family sat together, and the bride and groom’s parents sat near them. All were vaguely familiar with one another, over there was the bride’s best friend from college and her husband, to the right is the groom’s grandmother, and behind sits a cousin of the bride, perhaps a second cousin? Each table consisted of primary groups of family and friends, yet as a whole, the party was one large secondary group, consisting of people connected only by the relationship to the bride and groom, unlikely to speak with one another. The restaurant boasted a spectacular view of Lake Pend Oreille, with several docks and boats in sight. Beyond the patio a ukulele-guitar duo sang various love songs. The bride acted as an exemplary hostess, venturing from one table to the next, greeting and thanking her guests for coming. Here I saw a quandary, as the actual hosts, the groom’s father and step-mother, hung back awkwardly. I wondered why they were not welcoming their guests; after all, they were paying for all this. In addition, the bride’s mother soon began to make a speech. Her tone was warm, her message one of pride of her children and gratitude for finding another. Her speech reflected the faith she had raised her children with and the ethnic heritage she had instilled in them, using such terms of endearment as -ito and –ita added to their names. (Spanish suffixes meaning “little”.) This mother’s love for her Mexican culture, her ascribed heritage, made everyone *feel* as though they belonged to it too. Even for those who did not understand her references, those who had no idea what she was talking about, felt included because of the humility with which she presented it. Perhaps the groom’s parents did not feel anything else needed to be said, or were not instructed to make a speech.

The following morning was the start to one extremely long day for those involved. The local cafes and restaurants found themselves incredibly busy with incoming weddings guests and other sluggish visitors searching for their morning jolt and sustenance. Wedding party officials and those performing during the reception loaded the chair lifts around 2:00. Guests followed soon after, supplied with a cocktail of their choice to make the journey upwards more painless. Shortly after 3:00, all were present on top of the mountain, with the couple’s hired photographer wildly snapping away. The procession began, accompanied by Latin guitar music, a favorite of the groom and a cultural must of the bride. When all was in place, the bride, wearing her flowing ivory dress, veil, and vintage cowboy boots, and her father began to descend down the winding gravel road until it met the brick-lain courtyard. Upon reaching the arbor, hand-crafted by the groom himself, the father lifted the veil and kissed his daughter’s cheek. He and the groom embraced, then shook hands. The bride and groom shared an excited hug. The informality of these events set the tone for the entire ceremony. After a prayer, a few readings on love and marriage, an Irish blessing, an original song by the groom’s step-father, the happy couple’s “song”; the acting official, the groom’s uncle, pronounced them as “man and wife”. They boogied down the aisle to an old mo-town song and waited to take pictures in a near-by field. In a way, by taking their favorite aspects of friend’s weddings, the couple practiced a form of localization, in which one cultural tradition in transformed into something else. By doing this, they created their ideal wedding characterized by informal, humorous quirks and a great deal of family involvement. For example, the groom’s best man was his father, and one of his brothers was a groomsman. His step-father sang and played guitar at his ceremony, his sisters read, and his uncle officiated. The bride had her sister as her maid of honor, several cousins as a bridesmaid, a reader, and singer, and her grandmother had pronounced the blessing.

Their wedding intentionally did away with many of America’s wedding traditions. To the groom and bride’s Roman Catholic relatives, it was very odd for the ceremony to not include a priest, a Communion ritual, or a blessing. Conversely, any mention of God was merely tolerated by the groom’s agnostic aunt and atheist Grandpa. In an effort to appease these differing beliefs, the couple chose to get married on a mountain top (which was noted as being the place where they felt closest to God) and not in a religion-specific church, and to mention God in objective terms applicable to all religions. These actions demonstrate how the couple themselves promoted harmony among their guests.

**Conclusion**

It wasn’t until during the reception that I began to see how complex the “niceness” shown between the families was. One particular event that sparked this realization was the groom’s speech. When he thanked everyone for their support, he called both his step-mother and birth-mother “mom”. Normally, he referred to his step-mom by her first name. Approximately 5 years after his biological mother and father divorced his father remarried. Though the groom had spent time with his mother and step-father on weekends and special occasions off and on throughout his childhood, his step-mother had raised him. In this passing moment when he called his step-mother “my mom”, it seemed that she had earned the achieved position of motherhood. His biological mother would always retain the ascribed position. All through-out the wedding and its many pre-parties, neither mother has instigated any conflict; no one questioned the other’s right to be organizing the corsages. This example clearly shows how certain taboos exist among families, whether they are related biologically or kin through marriage, to maintain peace where a full-fledge battle could otherwise erupt.